



## WYOMING LEGISLATIVE SERVICE OFFICE

# Issue Brief

## WYOMING COMMUNITY COLLEGE SERVICE AREAS

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### PURPOSE

The Joint Education Interim Committee's (Committee) topics include review of the governance of community colleges under Priority #4, Community Colleges. This Issue Brief provides background information regarding the establishment of service areas for Wyoming community colleges and the process to modify these service areas. The Committee expressed interest in reviewing the service areas of northeast Wyoming and this Issue Brief outlines background on previous reviews of service areas and policy options for the Committee to consider. With the formation of the Gillette Community College District, the service area for the Northern Wyoming Community College District will change once Gillette Community College District becomes accredited.

### ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE SERVICE AREAS

The Wyoming Legislature directed the Wyoming Community College Commission (Commission) to establish the service areas of community colleges in 1991. Specifically, the Commission was directed to "submit a proposed service area plan to the legislature that would assign each county in the state to an area to be serviced primarily by a specific community college."<sup>1</sup> The Commission enacted its proposal through its 1993 Chapter 4 rules.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 depicts the service areas of each community college district, as proposed by the Commission in 1991. These service areas have not been changed or requested to be changed.

**Table 1. Wyoming Community College Service Areas.**

Community College District (County)	Additional Counties/Locations in Service Area <sup>3</sup>
Casper College (Natrona)	N/A
Central Wyoming College (Fremont)	Hot Springs and Teton; Wyoming State Penitentiary
Eastern Wyoming College (Goshen)	Converse, Crook, Niobrara, Platte, and Weston
Laramie County Community College (Laramie)	Albany
Northern Wyoming Community College District (Sheridan)	Campbell and Johnson
Northwest College (Park)	Big Horn and Washakie; Yellowstone National Park
Western Wyoming Community College (Sweetwater)	Carbon, Lincoln, Sublette, and Uinta

Source: Commission rules, Chapter 4, § 6(a).

<sup>1</sup> 1991 Wyo. Sess. Laws, Ch. 228, § 3(d).

<sup>2</sup> The Commission's 1993 rules, Ch. 4, § 9(g), established the community college service areas. The Commission's current rules, Ch. 4, § 6, contain the same service areas as established in the 1993 rules.

<sup>3</sup> While the Wyoming State Penitentiary is located in Carbon County, it is included in Central Wyoming College's service area based upon the 1991 proposal from the Commission.

The Commission indicates that once the Gillette Community College District becomes accredited, the service area of the Northern Wyoming Community College district will no longer include Campbell County and the service area of Gillette Community College District will encompass Campbell County.<sup>4</sup>

Counties within a community college's service area that have not been annexed into the community college district boundaries do not assess mill levies to support the college's operations and services within those counties.<sup>5</sup> Service area counties may voluntarily provide financial support to a community college district through other funds. Additionally, under current law, a community college district's board of trustees does not include representatives from a service area, rather trustees are only from the county from which the district is established.<sup>6</sup>

### COMMISSION AUTHORITY

In 2008, the Legislature granted the Commission the statutory authority to, "[f]ollowing public hearing, review and modify or maintain community college service areas provided all counties to be annexed to a college service area are contiguous to that service area."<sup>7</sup> The Commission is required to coordinate academic vocational-technical programs offered by any community college in another community college service area when a physical presence will be established and coordinate a response to any board of county commissioners if a college has determined not to provide a requested program.<sup>8</sup> The Commission's rules allow for a community college to provide distance education outside its established service area.<sup>9</sup>

The Commission's rules further outline the process the Commission, community colleges, or board of county commissioners may take in modifying service areas.<sup>10</sup> The Commission is required to hold a public hearing within 30 days upon notification to each community college and board of county commissioners or upon receipt of an application if it considers modifying service areas, and must issue the final decision not later than 120 days after the public hearing.<sup>11</sup> Before a community college or county applies to the Commission for a service area modification, it is required to "consult with each impacted college and county to explore operational changes that may alleviate the need to modify services areas" and "shall seek approval from the potentially receiving [college] district."<sup>12</sup> A community college or board of county commissioners seeking to modify the service area is required to submit an application to the Commission that includes a statement describing the required consultation efforts undertaken and how the modification benefits students and aligns with the statewide strategic plan.<sup>13</sup> The application also includes a statement on how students currently enrolled within the service area will be supported throughout the transition and realignment of the new service area.

<sup>4</sup> The Commission's rules, Chapter 1, § 2(b), define "accreditation" as "the process by a national or regional organization to grant public recognition of a program or college, indicating that it meets established standards of quality, as determined through initial and periodic self-study and peer evaluation." The Commission's April 20-21, 2023, meeting materials contain an update from the Gillette Community College District, indicating its initial letter of accreditation eligibility will be submitted to the Higher Learning Commission by June 30, 2023. According to the Commission, until Gillette Community College District achieves accreditation, course credits for students attending Gillette Community College District will be applied to the Northern Wyoming Community College District ensuring the students are academically protected.

<sup>5</sup> The annexation process can be found in W.S. 21-18-310 and is separate and apart from service areas.

<sup>6</sup> See W.S. 21-18-308.

<sup>7</sup> See W.S. 21-18-202(c)(viii) as created by 2008 Wyo. Sess. Laws, Ch. 84, § 1. Commission "[d]eterminations under this paragraph are subject to review in accordance with the Wyoming Administrative Procedure Act."

<sup>8</sup> See W.S. 21-18-202(b)(iv) and (vi).

<sup>9</sup> Commission rules, Ch. 4, § 6(c).

<sup>10</sup> Commission rules, Ch. 6, § 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

If the Committee wishes to further review and modify or maintain the current service areas, it could require similar Commission directives, through legislation, as it did in 1991.<sup>14</sup> These directives include the following:

- In consultation with each community college, conduct a comprehensive educational needs assessment of the service area of each community college;
- Establish and implement an assessment process under which each community college is evaluated on its performance in responding to the needs of its service area and which is based upon an assessment of student outcomes;
- Submit a proposed service area plan to the Legislature that would assign each county in the state to an area to be serviced primarily by a specified community college.

Additional items the Committee could consider as part of a review and modification of service areas that were not part of the 1991 review include:

- The impact to a community college from state aid allocations through the funding allocation model administered by the Commission;
- Facilities and equipment purchased and maintained in the community college service area that may no longer be part of the modified service area and potential impacts to state major maintenance appropriations;
- Items identified in the Commission's Chapter 6 rules and application, such as benefits to students, alignment to the statewide strategic plan, and consultation with boards of county commissioners.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current community college service areas have not been modified or been requested to be modified since the Commission's initial proposal in 1991. The service areas will change for the Northern Wyoming Community College District when the Gillette Community College District becomes accredited. The Commission has the statutory authority to review and modify or maintain service areas. As done in 1991, the Legislature could direct a further review of community college service areas and request the Commission to submit a proposal for approval.

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<sup>14</sup> 1991 Wyo. Sess. Laws, Ch. 228, § 3.